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Topic A

40 Years With the Bomb

An Interview With Henry A. Kissinger

'We Were Never Close to Nuclear War'

The former secretary of state talks to Stephen S. Rosenfeld of the editorial page staff.

Q: Here it is 40 years after the bomb. What is it that statesmen, practicing politicians who have actual responsibility for power, must know about the bomb?

A: They of course become very conscious of the consequences of a nuclear war. One of the first things you get briefed on when you are appointed to one of the top spots is the general consequences of a nuclear war.

Q: Does it scare you?

A: It awes you. And it shows you that you have a responsibility that no previous statesman has faced, in the sense that nobody has ever had the power to destroy mankind. In the past you could always say that the consequences of defeat were worse than the consequences of war. You cannot say that with assurance in the nuclear age.

Q: Can awe become paralysis?

A: It's your duty to prevent paralysis, and yet it is also your duty to recognize that nuclear power is not the same as traditional military power. This is the dilemma. If you permit it to go to paralysis, then you're turning the world over to the most ruthless, to the one who can plausibly threaten.

So this is in the back of your mind. But it has also a contradictory result that in most concrete crises that arise you do not believe that they will turn into general war.

Q: What gives you that hope, that faith that a crisis won't go nuclear?

A: Well, partly because when you're an American, you know that you have the ultimate decision over the actions leading to nuclear war and you know that your nuclear threshold is very high, and you assume that that is equally true on the other side. But it is a curious phenomenon that in the period at least in which I was in office, I did not believe at any time that we were close to nuclear war. And I suspect this has been true throughout the nuclear age, except perhaps the Cuban missile crisis.

Q: Well, now we have an interview of President Nixon in Time magazine [July 29] where he suggests that on at least four occasions he "considered" using nuclear weapons. He's referring to the Vietnam war, to the Soviets' threatening to take out China's nuclear facilities, to the India-Pakistan war and to the Middle East crisis of 1973. "Considered," of course, can mean many different things, but what are we talking about here?

A: I read that interview and frankly I was sufficiently concerned to talk to some of the other key decision-makers of that period—Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Thomas Moorer, the two security advisers, Gen. [Alexander] Haig and Gen. [Brent] Scowcroft—to see whether their recollection coincided with mine. And so I can safely say that there was never a concrete occasion or crisis in which the use of nuclear weapons was considered by the government.

One has to look at the problem of decision-making at various levels. One, a president obviously has to ask himself how far he's prepared to go if absolutely the worst were to happen. In this case if the Soviets attack China or if the Soviets pressure China as a result of the India-Pakistan war or in the Middle East crisis. And I cannot speak for what President Nixon, in the privacy of his office or of his living quarters, might have considered he was prepared to do.

In terms of the operation of the government, none of these crises reached a point where there was any planning to use nuclear weapons. There was never any decision—even any contingent decision—to use nuclear weapons if such a contingency should arise. And there was never any discussion of how far we would be prepared to go in these contingencies.

So we are talking about something the president must have had in the back of his mind as to his outer limit, but not something that in a crisis the government, either with the key advisers individually or as a group, ever considered.

Q: In the Middle East war of 1973 there was a so-called nuclear alert on the American side. Is that not an aspect of nuclear diplomacy?

A: Technically it is not 100 percent correct to call it a nuclear alert. What happened was we received a message from [Leonid] Brezhnev inviting joint American-Soviet military action in Egypt in effect against the Israelis who had just trapped the 3rd Egyptian army. Brezhnev added that if we did not agree to joint action, he would undertake